

A CHILD'S DEEP SENSE OF INSECURITY AND ALIENATION WITH REFERENCE TO KAMALA DAS'S AUTOBIOGRAPHY *MY STORY*

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ABSTRACT

My Story, a best-selling woman's autobiography in post-independence India, has carved a niche for Kamala Das in the milieu of women's autobiographies. Her autobiography is the collective repository of woman's experience that would ordinarily be treated as superfluous. Das highlighted the various images and roles of an Indian woman - as a wife, a mother, a daughter, a mistress through the presentation of her own experiences in her autobiography. She presents her readers a comprehensive view of *My Story*, which encompasses a woman's multifarious world of emotions. An autobiography must depict several life-sketches of different people and thus Das is at her best in depicting the picture of her childhood days. It springs from her own disillusionment with her expectation of unconditional love from her family members. The readers get an opportunity to travel through the story which gives them a glance of every event that happened in her life in the point of view of the narrator. This paper aims to study her autobiography *My Story*, with theme "quest for equitable love" in her childhood days from her family members.

KEYWORDS: Autobiography, Repository, Emotions, Life-Sketch, Disillusionment, Unconditional Love

INTRODUCTION

Kamala Das, one of the vibrant voices in modern poetry in English, has successfully portrayed the theme of family in almost all her works. As a writer, she made bold attempts to break the traditional shell of Indian woman with her fiery tone and confessional mode of writing. She takes reader to her confidence and opens her mind before them. Kamala Das wrote her sensational autobiography *My Story* at the age of 42. *My Story* had its genesis as one of the serious illnesses of Mrs. Das, as she informs us: "*My Story* is my autobiography which I began writing during my first serious bout with heart disease" in her "Preface" of *My Story*. She wrote it for two reasons: On her doctor's request to distract her mind from the fear of death and to pay for her hospital bills. Kamala's autobiography, *My Story*, was published serially in the Malayalam Journal *The Malayalanadu Weekly* during 1971-72. The English version of *My Story*, best known for her bold and sensuousness, first serialized the story in June 1976, by the editor of a Journal, *The Current Weekly*, Bombay, and paid her handsome money. It hit the book-stalls in Kerala and in other parts of the country rocketed Kamala Das into sudden popularity and it became one of the best-selling Indo-Anglian works.

KAMALA DAS'S *MY STORY*

My Story cannot be ignored by any person who is interested in studying an attractive autobiography. The natural outcome was that she was accorded no welcome while returning home, and, that she was even ignored by her kith and kin. This necessitated her hurried return to the cosmopolitan city of Bombay. But she did not break her promise to

the journalist and firmly stood her ground, completing the write-up of her autobiographical work on schedule. According to Kamala Das:

I sent a telegram to an editor who had been after me to write such a book to be used as a serial in his journal. He arrived after a day bringing with him total remuneration for the serial.... I wrote continually, not merely to honour my commitment but because. I wanted to empty myself of all the secrets so that I could depart when the time came, with a scrubbed-out conscience.” (*My Story* 5)

She felt immense pleasure in writing it, as she has disclosed in her preface: “I have written several books in my life time, but none of them provided the pleasure the writing of *My Story* has given me.” (Meena, 101-102)

PARENTAGE OF KAMALA DAS

In *My Story*, Kamala Das tells her personal experiences including memories of her childhood, her growth into womanhood, her unsuccessful quest for love in and outside marriage, and her living in matriarchal rural South India after inheriting her ancestral home. As an autobiography, *My Story* forcefully recounts Mrs. Das’s life-story, spanning from her early childhood, through adulthood and youth, to the age of sickness and disease. It faithfully records her neglected early age in Calcutta, with her father V. M. Nair who worked in private transport limited, and with her mother Padma Bhushan Balaamani Amma lying always on her belly on a large four-post bed, composing poems in Malayalam. Her mother, a renowned poetess, had no time to spare for the children. Das describes her home as “a house of cards” with one parent in Malabar - her lovable grandmother, and the other in Calcutta (81). She says “My Mother, vague and indifferent, spent her time lying on her belly... composing poems in Malayalam” (2). It can be understood from here that Das’s mother is also an exceptional woman. She was not a caring mother figure. Child’s psychology is much influenced by parental bondage. It appears that Das’s parents did not bring up Kamala Das and her brother with parental love and affection. Apparently, this could also be one of the reasons for Das’s eternal quest for love in her life.

AUTOCRATIC FATHER

Kamala Das’s father was a rationalist and also a strict disciplinarian. She adds, “His treatment of children was nightmarish and humiliating. He took the children for granted and never thought that children too have independently become developed personalities (74). She describes her father as a man who was always busy with his work. He is not very affectionate and because of this Kamala Das and her brother grew up neglected. She calls her father an autocrat.

Das makes several other references to her feeling of helplessness. For example, she speaks of her experiences with her father who “roared at us and struggled to make us drink the monthly purgative of pure castor oil” (5). The lexemes “roared” and “struggled” describe the father-child relationship in the writer’s situation. It is a relationship characterized not by love but by harshness. Das tells the reader:

This used to be one of our childhood nightmares, the ordeal of being woken out of sleep before dawn to have the ounce glass thrust into our mouths and rough hands holding our lips closed so that we swallowed the stuff and sank back on our pillows with tears of humiliation streaming from our eyes (5).

The dominating attitude of the parents who “took us for granted and considered us mere puppets, moving our limbs according to the tugs they gave us” (74) inflicted her mind with a feeling of vulnerability. The lexemes “puppets” and “tugs” signify that the writer did not feel free while at home either. Unable to get true love and

recognition from their parents, the writer tells us that she and her brother had to “hide in the vicinity of the kitchen” (5) .

When Kamala was a child, she was disturbed by the fact that the relationship between her mother and father as it was like a victim-victimiser relationship. Her father, who thought himself sovereign, expected total passivity and submission from his wife and she did display a passive acceptance of the scheme of things which marginalized rather negated her. Submission to male desire, passivity, reconciliation with an inferior role and annihilation of ego alone could lead to “domestic harmony.” So the women were afraid of men being their fathers, uncles or husbands and dared not protest.” Speaking of her parents, Kamala writes,

They were dissimilar and horribly mismatched. But my mother's timidity helped to create an illusion of domestic harmony which satisfied the relatives and friends (5).

One can come across several other references to her mother's submissive nature in the text of *My Story*.

The place her father holds in the family makes her aware of the inferior position of women – their secondary place in the world in relation to men – her culture's expectation that a woman should surrender completely to the male commands. The dependence of a woman because of the limitations imposed on her freedom by the culture she grows up in, and by her family traditions is obvious in many situations.

DOCILE MOTHER

Kamala was impatient to her mother's attitude of total acceptance of male domination. Tolerance of this kind was intolerable to the writer. She tried to fight for the rights of women at intellectual level. Kamala thought that her mother was far superior to her father and still she was “mortally afraid” of her husband and hence although they were “horribly mismatched”, her mother could maintain “domestic harmony” (4) because of her submissive nature.

Kamala Das, with a keen desire to retain her individuality, could never be the proverbial ‘doormate’ like her mother. She detests the timidity of her mother and disapproves of her passivity, lack of judgement, her willing acceptance of the social norms. Kamala being a girl with a strong masculine component, her willpower was thus bound to be rebellious towards all adult authority. She condemns the dominating attitude of her parents in:

They did not stop for a moment to think that we had personalities that were developing independently, like sturdy shoots of the banyan growing out of crevices in the walls of ancient fortresses (p. 74).

The opposition between “the personalities that were developing independently and “the walls of ancient fortresses” is a significant one in the sense that it shows the writer's strong need for freedom, her distaste for domination and authority and her refusal to accept “passivity” (p. 74). The expressions, “sturdy shoots”, “crevices, and “fortresses” also have a great expressive value. So strong was her need for freedom that even a fortress could not bind her just like sturdy shoots, that were bound to come out through the crevices asserting their existence thereby Kamala must assert her. The more she was dominated, the more conscious she became aware of her freedom. It was, in fact impossible for anybody to check her desire for freedom.

ANCESTRAL NALAPAT HOUSE

Das had the happiest childhood at the famous ancestral house called Nalapat House in Kerala. The only experience of intimacy that she had during her childhood in Calcutta was with her younger brother.

In collaboration with her brother, Kamala started a manuscript magazine. Being deserted by parents, Kamala and her younger brother are, therefore, forced to seek the company of servants. Only the cook took care of Kamala and her elder brother in serving the meals and carrying them to a European school a furlong away.

FINANCIAL POSITION OF NALAPAT FAMILY

The financial position of the Nalapat family to which Kamala Das belonged was precarious. Her parents were ill-matched to each other. They lived on the top floor of the repair-yard of the motor car company, where the father was employed, and the surroundings were none-too-happy and non-congenial. Once when they were on a picnic to the Victoria Gardens, Kamala felt very lonely and slipped out to the old cemetery. Speaking of her mental condition at that time, she observes. "I was too young to know about ghosts. It was possible for me to love the dead as deeply as I loved the living" (10).

NEGLECTED CHILDHOOD

Das's occasional slipping (10) out of the house is indicative of her silent defiance of parental authority and also to check on her freedom. For Das, her mother and the watchman also stood for authority. So she desired to escape from them – a desire which is exposed by the expressions "slipped out of the house" and "slipped out of the gate" (10). One can also notice her protest against the parental domination in her ironical use of the expression "parental privileges" in:

Velu was yellow with malnutrition. On birthdays we used to organize a beggar's feast for which Velu used to come, tugged in by his father who twisted his ears to show off in front of us his parental privileges (20).

Herself a neglected daughter, she feels sorry for the children who are neglected and dominated by their parents. The expressions "tugged in" and "twisted his ears" mark its significance for the parental domination. It also shows her unconscious rejection of authority in any shape or form.

LOVABLE GRANDMOTHER

Precisely speaking, the only place where Das and her brother who could find solace was from her grandmother who resides in Nalapat House. Das was aware of the fact that her parents were neglecting, rejecting, busy and authoritative. This acute awareness of her helplessness and her dependence was closely related to her awareness of being a neglected child. She felt helpless and dependent like a "leper" because she was neglected by her parents while she was aware of the fact that the social circle in which she was growing up "pampered the young." She writes:

So we grew up more or less neglected, and because we were aware of ourselves as neglected children in a social circle that pampered the young, there developed between us a strong relationship of love, the kind a leper may feel for his mate who pushed him on a hand-cart when they went on their begging round (2).

PSYCHOLOGICAL STUDY OF KAMALA DAS'S CHILDHOOD DAYS

Kamala's case provides an excellent opportunity for a psychological study of the loveless and emotionally deprived life of an imaginative romantic being who could not get what she desired out of any of her usual, socially recognized relationships. The lack of security and love in her well-to-do parents', at last made her whatever she became. 'Women are not born; they are made,' said the great French feminist Simon de Beauvoir in her thought-provoking

book "The Second Sex", an important mile-stone in the history of feminist thinking in a slightly different context (de Beauvoir, 683). In her view, it is the socialization of women as women which makes them what they become. Kamala's case convincingly demonstrates the truth of this observation. She was an ordinary girl, a 'good' girl from the society's standard – whom her deprivation and psychological needs turned into a rebel. According to M. K. Bhatnagar:

Kamala Das's story is the story of a woman who was denied love, when she valued nothing but love in all her life. Love and affection remained a craze, a longing and a dream for her. She got almost everything in life-name and fame, a degree of wealth but she could never get love, as she saw it. It is in this background that she writes about love in all her writings (183).

CONCLUSIONS

Kamala Das's childhood experience had filled her with a deep sense of insecurity and alienation. It is only love, she thought, which makes the world go round. One can notice confusion in her concept of love arising out of disappointment in parental love at any point of view. She feels a sense of incompleteness about her personality. So she turns to writing in order to find a new direction and meaning for her life, by becoming a non-conformist in the process. The critic Meena Sodhi opines that the autobiographical form of writing helps to bring into focus "the search for self delineation" through the "lifelines". The journey into the past can be proved cathartic and is a 'catalyst for healing' (101). She wished to be given recognition and identity and to be valued for her own sake.

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